

Middle Gila Canyons Travel Management Planning Notes from Workshop III - April 17th, 2007

Opening remarks

1) (Re-) Introduction to the project, goals, and ground rules¹ (Larry Fisher)

2) Objectives for tonight's discussion (Francisco Mendoza, BLM)

The focus of the discussion this evening will be on allowable uses. I think we have general agreement on the main access routes. In this planning process, we are working on the preferred alternative for the whole system of routes. The MGCP has done some good work on this and we are now seeking to finalize the preferred alternative. We have been looking at the different alternative maps as well as Map 5. In addition to these maps, the new map that we've brought with us today shows all the routes the BLM has permitted over the last 5 years for special OHV events that are still in the operating plan. They are not all technical trails; some are relatively easy to provide a range of types of trails because the OHV event organizers offer trips for different types vehicles and driving skills. They also show the names and route numbers that cross-reference the routes with the accessible database that we have here.

Initial statements from representatives

Jason Williams: The environmental, conservation, or non-motorized perspective is generally based on the principles of conservation of the landscape. It is not concentrated on the use of particular areas and trails. We want the Middle Gila to be a place that can be used for a long, long time. If we were not at the table, maybe the conversation would go easier, but there are many other interests. The concern that my constituency has, and what I am trying to do here, is to rein in the motorized use out there. It seems if I wasn't at the table, there wouldn't be a lot left to conserve or fight for. There are lots of routes, a little over 300 miles. What we are looking at are the most sensitive places, and they just happen to be the most fun for rock crawling. There is a difference between organized events and the every day use. I think there is a problem with administrative permit access, because for the BLM to administer this – it's just unrealistic. Hopefully AGDF can add some perspective on where the resources are, where the petroglyphs are, and where the wildlife is. OHV interests can point us to the most important trails. If we really want to make some progress, then when we disagree we have to agree to move on.

Tom Taylor: I am mostly focused on Martinez Canyon. I would like to see it classified as a riparian area to conserve the riparian values and historic cabins. There are too many vehicles going through there. I would like to see us prioritize this area, and possibly agree

¹ The PowerPoint presentation for the remarks can be found at: [redacted]

to close Martinez Canyon. If there is some give and take, it will have to come regarding other areas, because many of us believe that Martinez should be closed.

Chris Raddoccia: Let me clarify that my initial proposal last week was a starting point, not a give-and-take. We've already agreed to close Lower Woodpecker and the Gila River bottom, as long as we have trails crossing the river connecting the trails on the north and south. We've already conceded both of those so I don't know if we need to go over these again. All we want are trails that traverse the river that are already established as connecting trails. Obviously BLM would stop you on dead-end trails. The only thing that we are asking for is mitigation on Martinez Canyon. I think a gate will keep the irresponsible people out. No one wants them out there. The Forest Service has examples of where this gated access works. I went to a conference recently where mitigation ideas were talked about; as one example, erosion going straight down a hill can be successfully mitigated by switchbacks. There are ways to cross streams while avoiding the water and riparian areas. I think there are things like this that we can compromise on. In Martinez Canyon, all we're suggesting is that it be gated and designated as a study area for 3 years, which is the same timeline as an emergency closure. If this doesn't work, we'll know - and at that point we can lock the gate. Martinez Canyon is a beautiful area, and no one should be prevented from seeing it. If you show and prove it too us, we can listen and look at good science. I think people should take a close look at this proposal - since it's an opportunity for everyone to win.

Sandee McCullen: I think we need to avoid personal opinions. Tom, your comment led me to believe that you have proof that OHV has caused damage in Martinez Canyon. There is no proof of this connection. That's why we want a few years to conduct this study. There are a range of mitigation options we can explore. I suggest we look at data and real criteria on every trail. The bottom line is the numbers. There are a lot of user-created trails on the State Trust lands, but very few of the trails on BLM land are random trails. If you start taking these away, where are people going to go? They're going to make new trails. If you give a recreation user a quality system, they will stick to it. Yes, there are yahoos, and we are doing our best to deal with them. If we get help with law enforcement and other areas, we will be three steps ahead. We have to be able to answer the question of where they are going to go.

Francisco Mendoza: In a sense, Upper Martinez Canyon had controlled access about 10 years ago. There are some here that have visited that area; I wonder what kind of impacts you've seen since then? My perspective is only over the past eight years. We did have an archeological survey done of the routes, and the archeologist looked at prior surveys from Martinez Canyon in the mine area and the shelter area. The conclusion was that has been a lot of loss in cultural resource values in these areas. Whether it's from the weather or other causes -

Bill Mihailov: I have been going to the area since 1972. About 3 or 4 miles before you get to Martinez Canyon there used to be a structure off the side of the trail that has collapsed. The collapse was not caused by OHVs, but by the weather. Termites have also

caused a lot of damage. I haven't seen anyone going near that place – it's the natural process that is bringing things down.

Sandee McCullen: At that point in time there were a couple of clubs that were allowed access. Personally, I haven't seen much change near the riparian area. But as far as the frame house at the Martinez cabin site, a tree is pushing it off the foundation. A lot of the damage is natural and weather-related. Pete can tell stories of sitting on the countertops as rain was coming through the roof. Before, a Cadillac could drive all the way to the mill on that trail, people were all over it. Since then, Mother Nature has moved boulders as big as this room and taken out the entire road. Most of what's happened there is due to Mother Nature. There is of course the oil issue, and the OHV community is working on that. We are asking all vehicles to carry oil absorbent products. Technical vehicles are starting to have fluid retention systems. As far as the cave, I believe that that is just people. You certainly can't attribute that to OHV. Most of the changes are beyond the mill.

Jason Williams: I think there was a lot of opinion expressed there, and I disagree with much of it. The science does show that motorized access close to archeological sites causes degradation. This has been shown and demonstrated in a number of places. I'm not blaming anyone in particular, but these are the facts.

John Windes: At the last meeting it was requested that the agencies bring their mission statements, so I am going to start off with the mission statement of the AGFD so everyone knows our position:

“To conserve, enhance and restore Arizona's diverse wildlife resources and habitats through aggressive protection and management programs, and to provide wildlife resources and safe watercraft and off-highway vehicle recreation for the enjoyment, appreciation, and use by present and future generations.”

In short, AGFD emphasizes the protection of habitat and wildlife. Of course, we have to balance that mission with other considerations. We have to get people out on the landscape and provide OHV recreation, but we do have to protect the resources out there. We believe we're facing a compromised position, and we know what we can live with and what we can't live with, and we're prepared to discuss it.

Joan Scott: I think I need to start by clarifying issues related to washes. Areas like the Middle Gila Canyons provide very important habitat for wildlife. This is not to say we can't have some compromise. We know BLM has been permitting motorized use in washes. When Sandee was talking about where people are going to go, her statement could be used by any group, such as hunters. There are finite limits to resources, and when you get to a certain place, you just have to say that's all there is. The same thing is happening with lakes – there are an increasing number of recreational boaters. One day there are going to be too many people, and we're going to have to set some limits. It's not going to make people happy, especially if they just spent \$20,000 on a brand new boat.

While permitting motorized recreation in washes is not the best thing for wildlife, we realize there are necessary compromises. What got John interested in this areas in the first place was that there were too many roads, and too many people driving in every wash there was. Chris and Sandee proposed giving up Lower Woodpecker, modifying Upper Woodpecker, conceding the river bottom, and putting a gate on Martinez Canyon with a three year study. We also have a proposal that we would like to discuss. We think this is a middle ground proposal.

Another issue, from our perspective, is the density of roads. One thing we would propose is the identified used OHV routes be allowed on a permitted, limited basis. They would not be open to the general public, but open for special events. The damage that is happening to washes right now would be less, and they could be controlled by the measures that Sandee has talked about (for example, oil retention and certain other required equipment). When I was out there recently, I saw a truck try to drive up Upper Woodpecker because he saw other people doing it at a special event. Well, this truck got stuck. The organized group behind him then had to avoid him by driving around him, creating further damage to the river banks. Part of what a permit system would do is help prevent the general public from attempting these things. We propose a permit system that would consist of limiting the number of days for use.

Q: Do you mean all the routes?

Q: Francisco, how many permits are typically given in a year?

A: Just a few.

Q: What is the current use? How many days a year do you permit?

A: Maybe four to six days, depending on the event. Doug Larson had about 80 vehicles in his permitted group last month.

C: Although there might have been a few permitted uses, there are still a lot of general users.

Q: Is there some way that we can only let people in that are checked by OHV groups to make sure they have the right equipment? This is how the permit system would work...

C: That is exactly what we do right now with special event permits.

C: I don't think any agency can prevent general use of the trails. Who is going to sit at the gate watching all the time?

A: It would be just like when we hammer in stakes to show that certain routes are closed. We constantly have to go and fix them. We know it won't be perfect, but at least we can limit the use.

C: If you're asking to put a sign in at Lower Woodpecker that specifies recommended equipment, that's fine!

A: No, it would say "this is not a route and no motorized use"

Q: When it comes to getting hunting permits how many groups like PETA get the permits and just throw them away?

A: From our experience, 90% of the people who get permits are hunters.

C: I disagree with permits, and with requiring permission to drive on public lands. You can say this, but the OHV community has to say that we don't agree.

Jason Williams: I'm actually in agreement that the administration of this would be a big issue and it wouldn't be free. But as far as routes go, there are going to have to be some closures.

Bill Mihailov: When it comes to impacts, every user causes impacts. Bulldog Canyon in the Tonto National Forest in AZ actually limits camping areas and hiking trails. If we are talking about permitted access, the permit needs to be across the board.

Glen Collins: I've been involved for seven years with this project. The MGCP was set up to deal with these issues. Originally this area was a forgotten area of BLM, Forest Service and State Trust lands. The MGCP concluded that these lands should be kept in public ownership for public uses. The Morrison Institute told us to put a name on it to help generate public support for keeping these lands in public ownership. The area now has a name - it's called "Middle Gila Canyons". And now we're talking about the Middle Gila Canyons area being used and enjoyed by the 2 million people who live nearby. We need to recognize that OHV use is the heaviest use and it brings the most people to the area. I have heard trail names and now I can finally see them in the map. In my view, we need to do 3 things:

1) Establish a complex of named canyons for technical OHV uses. We have never looked at the routes as a complex. We have now agreed on the green routes for recreational touring. The State lands have not been part of this discussions, but they are the places where the MGCP put most of the OHV camping, staging and play areas, and the MGCP report has done a lot identify the need to keep these State Trust lands in public ownership for public uses. Now what we need to do is to establish some identified canyons on BLM lands for technical OHV uses, confine the technical uses to those identified canyons and give the complex a name, something like Mineral Mountain Technical OHV Trails Area" to help publicize the area and the restrictions on OHV uses. In this meeting we need to figure out which canyons would be used for which kinds of uses.

2) Identify the criteria BLM would use for protecting other resources (for example archeological sites, wildlife) in the technical OHV use canyons. We shouldn't worry about permits or gates in this meeting. We should focus on what named canyons could be in the complex and when and how they are going to be used, and let BLM deal with the details about how to enforce the uses of the canyons.

3). Forget about Martinez Canyon in this discussion - it's just too much of an emotional issue. I would like to come out of this meeting with a plan for OHV use of an identified complex of other canyons for OHV technical uses. Let BLM decide how to administer these uses could occur in these other canyons based on our recommendations of where the uses can take place. Let's not fight about the number of people or the number of days in this meeting. Bill Gibson described a good example of how this is working on BLM lands in other states, so we know this has worked in other places. Let's come up with a system of technical OHV trails in this group that we can recommend to the BLM.

Comments/Questions:

C: We've been talking a lot about OHV use. Right now we are just talking about technical trails. A lot of those trails are multiple use trails for ATV's, motorcycles, and mountain bikes. The discussion needs to focus on the designations of the types of trails and their designated uses.

C: There are 11 "technical" trails that would require special equipment. There are actually 8 now that Lower Woodpecker and Jawbreaker are off the table, and we're not talking about Martinez. That amounts to about 8 miles of trails. And 5 of those are considered moderate. The names of the remaining trails: Middle Woodpecker, Upper Woodpecker, Axle Alley, Overdose, Highway to Hell, Bad Medicine, Upper Ajax, and Woody's Wash.

SUMMARY SO FAR (Larry Fisher):

The representatives have outlined their views on these remaining trails, but it's clear that the group tends to get bogged down when defining positions, or when stating (and/or refuting) opinions. The inventories have some of the information to address these issues, but we don't have all of the data and the science needed to resolve some of the statements and concerns that we've heard. During these discussions, therefore, we'll just have to agree that individual interpretations are not necessarily helping the conversation. So, again, we'll note concerns or questions, and then ask and expect BLM to address these as it works through the alternatives and the proposed action.

Tonight you've decided to focus on these remaining, contentious, technical trails. There are of course many other parts of the travel management plan, but this is the focus tonight. They are a finite group of trails, and most everyone here has views about them,

and knows the characteristics of these trails. We can look at them as a complex, or work through them individually. Martinez Canyon brings us back to opinions and conjecture, and it is clearly a very emotional site for everyone. So the proposal, for the moment, is to take Martinez Canyon off the table for discussion. Is this agreed?

C: If we have time, maybe we can get to it at the very end.

C: When I talk about this area, it is a package deal. When I talk about other routes, Martinez Canyon is part of it. The reason I got into this was Martinez Canyon.

So, then, for the moment at least, we've agreed to set Martinez aside, and begin working through the remaining set of technical trails. We've also agreed to close Lower Woodpecker and Jawbreaker. These, then, are the remaining routes to discuss:

- ☐ Middle Woodpecker
- ☐ Upper Woodpecker
- ☐ Overdose
- ☐ Highway to Hell
- ☐ Bad Medicine
- ☐ Broken Ankle
- ☐ Woody's Wash
- ☐ Upper Ajax

FM (BLM): I should clarify that 3 routes on this map were not authorized for OHV special permit use, such as Woody's Wash and Broken Ankle. They were never officially permitted, although they are still up for discussion tonight.

Discussion:

SM: There has been talk of making Middle Woodpecker a play area for OHV use. There is a very wide section in the area, and a section of boulders in the middle. It can handle stock vehicles all the way through. We are asking that we be allowed to move some of the boulders and make it more of a challenge, and make it a play area. It would be like Lower Woodpecker, but it would avoid the cultural sites.

C: There is a cultural site on a large boulder at the east end of the trail. It would be important to avoid this area.

JS: There is a road that parallels this and this is an example of driving in a wash. I understand it's a fun place to be. It's also habitat that should have green vegetation. Sand is building up on it. It is not only used by technical vehicles, but by everyone. This is one of those routes that is just inappropriate for vehicles. However, we're willing to support use here, but less use than is currently there. That's the main concern with the OHV proposal – it doesn't limit the use of the trail.

C: You are saying just because it is a wash it can not be driven on. There are many washes that no one has driven on and there are still impacts from erosion.

C: Lower, Middle and Upper Woodpecker were once the routes to the mines, and that was not that long ago.

JS: I agree. It's my contention that driving on it now for so many years is causing impacts. That's why there was another road put along side it. Your position is that there is no need to limit the use of it, right?

A: No, I don't think it is needed. If there was hard data, and just not opinion, maybe my answer would be different.

C: When a heavy truck drives over an area, you loosen soil and rocks. When water comes, it is going to take it away. It also loosens roots. It loosens and loses basically what is holding it together as a wash.

C: Woody's Wash goes alongside of Middle Woodpecker – correct? It's in a wash. That is not a route that was used traditionally. Looking at the larger scale, I agree with Joan. It's really hard to talk about wash access. What I see density-wise is that Woody cuts across the landscape more then the route that travels along the Cottonwood Canyon road. Therefore, I'd prefer to see this section closed.

Q: You're talking about moving boulders. If you got the trail the way it is right now would it allow you to do what you want to do?

C: Woody's Wash is much worse than keeping Middle Woodpecker open. You have Cottonwood Canyon right here, Woody right here, do we really want to intensify this area that is already fragmented and heavily used? My concern is for connectivity and density of trails.

C: We just don't want to intensify Middle Woodpecker.

C: It's true that washes, over time, downgrade – and that can be triggered by many things. I think it would be possible to stabilize the downgrading process on some of these streams with a control structure.

C: We're trying to accommodate OHV use, this is part of a complex. There are some things that can mitigate the impacts.

Bill Dunn: On either end of Woody there are windmills, right?

A: There was a windmill nearby, it is gone, but the well is still there and is a seasonal livestock water (electric pump/storage tank/drinkers).

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BD: If cattle are crossing back and forth here, then that is a main concern.

C: Cattle have been there many years.

BD: Yes, but we are talking about bunching a lot of people in one area.

C: No, we're not. The same amount of people would be on Middle Woodpecker because we're just moving traffic from Lower Woodpecker to Middle.

J Williams: I don't agree. I don't want travel in Middle Woodpecker or rockcrawling, but I'm willing to consider this as a trade. I would propose closing Woody, but would allow Middle Woodpecker to remain open for use.

JS: My opinion of Woody is that it isn't a trail anyway. I have been there, it looked like only about three people had been there. But I understand Jason's point, and impacts are already there. So, yes, maybe we should let Middle Woodpecker go?

CR: I'm not willing to go with Woody as "red." BLM has said it has to be an existing trail we're talking about. At the very least, I wouldn't fight to put it on the list for future trails that could be built as needed, but to just close it – I just can't agree. Right now we've already spent an hour on the least controversial wash!

JS: It's not because BLM has never permitted it. It's because of the habitat values. There is still vegetation in this wash. There are resources there.

J Windes: Woody's Wash has a lot of erodable areas. People have pulled out rocks and stacked them. Tracks alone cause damage to the soils. There is a disturbance factor here because of wildlife. I think more wildlife could occur in this area if it was closed.

SM: We are starting to get into opinions again.

CR: Are there any of these technical trails that AGFD would be willing to have green/open?

JS: No, we feel that none of these technical trails should be green.

CR: Well, then, that's the end of the conversation right there.

JS: Let me clarify – we do support limited use on all of these technical trails except Overdose and Woody. These would be closed. We're suggesting a permit system. Green means everyone all the time. We don't support that.

FM: Could limitations on routes be physical and not legal?

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JS: Excellent question. No, I don't think physical limitations would work. I think we would get 5 times the amounts of Broncos, 5 times the use, and the impacts are the same. I don't know how to work around that.

BM: I am not disagreeing with fragmentation – some of this is definitely occurring. But I have seen water in Box Canyon; I've been out there, I've seen it eroded and washed out, I've seen pictographs in the washes and not seen any pictographs on the main trail. The damage done is not as great as you are describing. Not all areas have sand wash away because of driving, but from water as well. Lots of these washes are mining roads, like Upper Woodpecker. We're not looking to expand the area. We need a place to recreate. We already have a complex. As far as erosion, I have seen it come and go.

GC: Can we acknowledge that groups agree on establishing a series of names besides Overdose and Woody? We can talk about a minimal set of technical trails, then talk about limitations?

J Williams: As it turns out, I am more of a compromiser than others in my group. I was hoping to be in this process with the draft EA, and with scientific data on the effects of all routes open or closed. I feel, at this point, that I'm not representing my constituency appropriately. I think there should be no driving in washes. I think we're back at the route evaluation, and all we have are our opinions. To me the whole area is a package. At this point, all the proposals we've heard so far are off the table for me. I'm not going to endorse or reject any future proposals, but you all can continue to talk. I just wish we had more data, and I am uncomfortable with trading tit for tat.

SM: "I agree that we are not likely to reach any further consensus. We would of said this eventually if Jason's group hadn't."

BLM: As far as the EA process, we need to come to the preferred alternative. All the alternatives are analyzed. We have to have the alternatives-it's a difficult road.

SM: No one's talked about the "do nothing" alternative. Putting up signs will just serve as magnets. The ones that are getting used are going to be used.

Bill: I think the members of the BLM over the past 5 years know all the interests, and we don't need to take more time out of our lives to discuss this any further. We need to turn it over to the BLM now. BLM has heard all our opinions and Francisco knows what we want. No matter what we have decided, BLM will take it and put it into a blender.

JS: We can't change the color on a map unless everyone agrees. So it doesn't look like this is going to happen.

GC: I think we can conclude, and turn it over to BLM. Each group could put a package together and present it to the BLM

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FM (BLM): BLM needs to come up with a proposed action. What we are doing right now is planning collaboratively to see if we can accommodate access needs. The discussion so far has been focused on recreation access, since this is clearly the most difficult issue. We are trying to get the recreation needs accommodated. This is a planning step, and BLM wants to develop a plan that accommodates the uses as best we can. Part of the considerations we have to include are minimizing impacts as well as other things. We can't do the EA until we have the proposed action.

Q: Do you need/want the help from us still?

FM: Yes. We have to label these roads something when we develop BLM's preferred alternative. For us to do that, we also have to analyze the range of alternatives. The whole idea of this collaborative process was for you all to help us determine this.

SM: All those routes have been existing trails so that's our preferred alternative. We have worked for several years, and the BLM already has its three alternatives. This process is essentially repeating what we've already done during the MGCP. Everything is in the MGCP report.

FM: Yes, we already have a reasonable, logical range of alternatives. The thought was to work together to jointly agree on a preferred.

BM: BLM gave it a good try, but this group is just not going to get there. Some measure of progress has been made, but rest will just have to go to the BLM. Don't we all agree, then, that we're done, and that the Thursday meeting is not needed. The structure worked well tonight, but I think we're all in agreement that there's nothing really left to discuss.

Amy Mihailov: I would like to ask the BLM to release the alternatives for public comment in the winter. This is the time of heaviest use, and few people who use the areas is here during the summer

FM: We've already agreed on a general timeline for the decision process, and I think we'll have to stick to that timeline. I don't think it's possible to move it back that far, but BLM will take this into consideration.

Cindy Alvarez (BLM): From the BLM perspective, I don't want anyone to think we didn't make progress. For everyone to be willing to come back and discuss this, that shows a lot. We did not get to where we all wanted to be, but we did make considerable progress, and this has been a useful and productive dialogue. So thank you all for your time, and for all the effort you put into trying to make this work.